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ABSTRACT

High school graduates too frequently find the routes to their career goals blocked by inadequate reading skills. College instructors can help these academically disabled students by accurately diagnosing students' reading deficiencies and by selecting appropriate materials to strengthen specific skill areas. In selecting materials for learning disabled students it is important to stress visual, auditory, and tactile learning experiences. Basic word recognition skills of reading disabled students can be strengthened through exercises in sound and symbol discrimination, structural analysis (phonics, decoding, and syllabication), dictionary use, figures of speech, and comprehension. (AEA)

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Selecting and Using Materials for College Disabled Students

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Graduates of our elementary and secondary schools today frequently find routes to their chosen goals blocked by inadequate reading skills. For any number of reasons--erratic attendance, experimental reading programs, audial or visual handicaps, unfamiliarity with English--gaps may occur in the process of learning to read. Students who try to bridge these gaps at the secondary or junior college level encounter a dearth of appropriate materials. Teachers who must deal with these students also recognize the need for programs designed especially for them.

Accurate diagnosis in the treatment of reading problems is especially important with older students. Their wide variety of backgrounds allows for great unevenness in reading skills. Determining individual needs as early and accurately as possible will both facilitate the learning process and reduce frustration and boredom. There are many informal inventories on the market or you may prefer to use a diagnostic reading test. Once diagnosis of deficiencies has been made, the resourceful instructor can find and utilize a number of materials, some readily available and reasonably inexpensive.

Needless to say, the selection of materials is of utmost importance. However, no one program will meet the needs of all students. It is important that the instructor constantly monitor students' progress and supplement a program with additional materials when further work is needed to teach a specific skill. It is important to start very slowly to insure success on the part of the learner and to provide enough repetition so that each skill is carefully and sequentially taught.

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In working with a disabled student it is important not only to stress the modality in which he/she demenstrates strength but to include all modalities--visual, auditory and tactile. The learning disabled student needs to visualize (in print) the material, hear (through tapes) the sounds and words, and feel (through writing).

The primary and most important discrimination a student must make in the reading process is between sound and symbol. Some letter symbols have only one sound (single consonant sounds), some have multiple sounds, and, in other cases, two or three symbols may have only one sound (digraphs). Distinctions such as those between the sounds of g, the two sounds of c and the sounds attached to q are crucial and especially difficult for persons with audial deficiencies or who are not native speakers of English. If a student has difficulty recognizing consonant sounds listening carefully to these sounds on a tape as he/she looks at the symbol in print should help overcome this deficit. It is important that the sound be made first in isolation and then used in words where it appears at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of words. It is essential to allow enough time and an adequate number of exercises for these increasingly complex concepts. Exercises made up of travel ads and humorous want ads, in which the student gets practice working with consonant blends and digraphs, make learning less painful. Articles from the newspaper covered with plastic allow the student to underline blends, vowels, prefixes, subfixes or practice any other skill the instructor indicates.

While there are, of course, fewer vowels than consonants, they tend to be more troublesome because of the greater number of sounds associated

with each. The many vowel pairs add to the complexity. It is also true that there are numerous exceptions to vowel rules and it is perhaps wiser not to try to include all the exceptions in either tests or lessons. Tapes can be particularly helpful in providing practice in distinguishing among vowel sounds. They are a time saver for the instructor and enable the student to practice extensively and independently. A wide variety of exercises should be available to provide sufficient practice. Again, exercises can be taken from published workbooks or can be created by the inventive teacher. An example of such an exercise for the vowel pairs "au" and "aw" might involve an advertisement. This story asks students to distinguish among "ee," "ea," and "ey." Once the basic consonant/vowel concepts are grasped, the student may move to more complex letter groupings and to the important word recognition skill of structural analysis--recognizing roots, prefixes and suffixes.

One of the most important skills we use is structural analysis. Materials abound which can be adapted as exercises in this area. Newspaper ads are readily available. Filling in missing prefixes (suffixes) in easily recognized words in sentences makes the student aware of the function of prefixes without the distraction of unusually difficult words.

A number of years ago, when I first started working with learning disabled students, I found many of them were very weak in decoding skills. They needed intensive work in phonics. I now find that many have some decoding skills but are frequently unable to apply basic phonics skills to other learning situations. The student can make isolated letter sounds but cannot blend them well enough to make a word. This type of student needs intensive work in integrating letters and syllables into

the formation of a complete word. Nonsense words are also helpful in giving the student practice in dividing parts of words into prefixes, roots, suffixes, digraphs, etc.

Syllabication is an area of structural analysis about which there is disagreement among the experts. However, while its usefulness in structural analysis may be limited, it is especially helpful to the older student who wants to work in typing, word processing, copywriting and similar fields. Here again, both the needs of the students and the appropriateness of the material demand consideration. Students who have mastered prefixes, suffixes and roots will not find syllabication excessively difficult.

The use of the dictionary is another important skill. Alphabetizing skills and understanding of guide words facilitate use of reference tools. Practice in alphabetizing may be gained by listing words in a series or scrambling a sentence which, when words in it are alphabetized, will make sense. An example is "A users operation big produced drug teen-age" ("A big drug operation produced teen-age users"). These skills can also be applied in telephone directories (especially the yellow pages), catalogues, and recipe books. It should be remembered, especially in working with older students and other adults, that the more practical the skill can be made to appear, the more quickly it will be learned.

Students should be aware that there are some ways of determining meaning when one is in a hurry or a dictionary is not available. A highly valuable skill for these situations is the ability to discern meaning from context. Context clues range from the fairly simple (an unknown

word in a list of familiar and similar items) to the more complex (drawing inferences from surrounding material). Students can have fun with context clues based on comparisons (metaphors) and figures of speech.

Newspaper ads are very useful in finding comparison words, antonyms, matching articles with the correct headline and many other exercises. Some materials produced by the Providence Adult Education have illustrations and drawings with labels and matching opposites which serves as a means of teaching contextual analysis.

Comprehension, the ultimate goal of word recognition, should certainly not be overlooked in the selection of exercises. Reading matter should be carefully chosen, with a difficulty and interest appropriate to the student. Language experience stories dictated by one student often will make good reading material for another student. Newspaper or magazine articles are also a handy source of reading material.

While more and more material is being produced for adult students, it is still necessary for the instructor to select and adapt to suit individual needs. Careful testing may reveal a need for more intensive work in one area than can be provided in a single workbook or other source. Teachers may need to adapt pages from a variety of workbooks or use materials at hand to create their own. Often it will be the interest level which will have to be adjusted. While elementary school texts and workbooks treat basic word recognition skills, adult students will not be thrilled by exercises concerned with the activities of Spot and Puff. The significance of audial and visual discrimination must also be kept constantly in mind. For this purpose, tapes can be useful throughout the learning process and can be used as part of a final evaluation of progress.

If video recorders are available, interesting lessons in practical word recognition skills can be caught from television commercials. Students can make their own ads and ask others in the class to analyze them. Making up a name for a product, for example, and composing an ad for it can give practice in learning from context as well as phonetic analysis for pronunciation. "Gluckal" can be defined from the kinds of claims made for it by the sponsors (students). Job applications for real or imaginary jobs can be good practical practice items. So can order forms in catalogues. Actual forms can be obtained from businesses or manufactured by a teacher or students with a sense of humor. Resources are all around the creative teacher. Given a basic text or outline to follow, such a teacher can supplement readily, without a disproportionate expenditure of time, to meet individual student's needs and provide variety in practice. Careful analysis of preliminary needs assessments or inventories will permit tailoring of exercises and avoid wasted efforts and time for both teacher and student.

The day may come, and we all hope that it is soon, when it will be rare for a student to leave the primary grades without a grasp of basic word recogntion skills. That day has not arrived, and until it does the concerned instructor of college disabled students will continue to spend time and energy selecting, adapting and using materials that will provide them with those essential skills.